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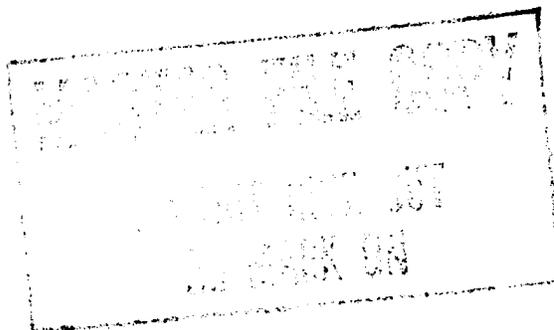
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Syria: The Succession Struggle and Rif'at's Prospects



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An Intelligence Assessment



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*NESA 84-10256
September 1984*

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Syria: The Succession Struggle and Rif'at's Prospects



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An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by 
Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. It
was coordinated with the Directorate of
Operations. 

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Comments and queries are welcome and may be
directed to the Chief, Arab-Israeli Division, NESA,



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**Syria: The Succession
Struggle and Rif'at's
Prospects** 

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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 10 August 1984
was used in this report.*

President Assad's medical crisis in November 1983—we believe he suffered a heart attack—set off a power struggle among his advisers that has forced him to deal with the succession issue. Rif'at Assad, the President's brother and now one of three vice presidents, is pressing for an unchallenged claim to the succession. Rif'at's liabilities are extensive, however, and his inept maneuvering has prompted strong opposition from senior military, government, and Ba'th Party leaders. 

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We believe Rif'at is unlikely to succeed to the presidency when Assad dies. The longstanding hatreds between Rif'at and his opponents, his intemperate and impulsive behavior, and divisions even within his own Alawite community over his fitness to rule suggest he will be unable to strike the necessary political deals or build a base broad enough to emerge as Assad's political heir. 

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A more plausible succession scenario is the elevation of a prominent Sunni official—Minister of Defense Talas or Army Chief of Staff Shihabi, for example—to the presidency while Rif'at or other senior Alawite commanders attempt to exercise power behind the scenes. Such a deal on the succession could easily collapse if Assad dies while tension remains high, but Assad's lieutenants have a common interest in heading off an internecine struggle. We believe there is a better-than-even chance of an initially orderly transition, particularly if Assad's health remains stable long enough for him to restore a rough balance of power and workable relations among the factions. The longer term prospects for stability under a successor regime, however, are slim. 

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In our judgment, Assad's death will not advance US interests in the region. We expect strong continuities in Syrian policies through the transition. No new leader would be likely to abandon Syria's terms for withdrawal from Lebanon, to soften its terms for a settlement with Israel, or to forgo Soviet weapons supplies. 

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A weak successor regime might contribute to new tension in the Middle East. A new Syrian leader less tactically adept than Assad and seeking to strengthen the regime's legitimacy might abandon Assad's caution on the direct use of Syrian troops, allow renewed Palestinian activity across the Golan Heights, or otherwise provoke the Israelis. 

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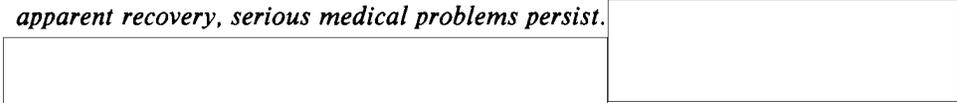
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Assad's Health



Assad, January 1983. Liaison ©

President Assad has resumed an active schedule following his hospitalization—almost certainly for a heart attack—and convalescence last winter. Despite his apparent recovery, serious medical problems persist.



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Assad's heavy workload and his refusal to follow doctors' orders cast a shadow on his prospects for a lasting recovery.



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The US Embassy in Damascus notes Assad has ignored his physicians' counsel to go abroad for further medical attention and rest.



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Assad, after hospitalization in late 1983. Monday Morning ©

Another sudden deterioration of Assad's health could easily occur. We know of nothing immediately life threatening about his condition, but the risk of having another heart attack is significantly increased by the fact that he has already had a heart attack.



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Syria: The Succession Struggle and Rif'at's Prospects [Redacted]

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Tensions in the Inner Circle

Assad's medical crisis in November 1983 triggered a power struggle among his advisers centered on the succession. [Redacted]

Rif'at Assad, the President's brother and now one of three vice presidents, asserted a claim to the succession after Assad was hospitalized and began trying to elicit support from key military commanders. Rif'at's apparently clumsy attempt to eliminate any challenge to his ambitions soon generated strong opposition from senior military, government, and Ba'th Party leaders. [Redacted]

[Redacted] Rif'at squandered his initial acceptance by some senior commanders in his bid for recognition as Assad's political heir. He progressively alienated key regime leaders by trying to control access to the ailing President and ineptly launching an effort to win public support. Rif'at's continued maneuvering after Assad's condition improved invited further opposition. [Redacted]

[Redacted]

Rif'at's attempts to win support capped a nearly 10-year effort to position himself to take power when Assad leaves the scene. According to Embassy reports, since 1975—when he engineered a seat in the ruling Ba'th Party's Regional Command and arranged the political defeat of two influential Ba'th leaders who opposed him—Rif'at has accumulated power, establishing a role as the regime's "enforcer" through his command of the Defense Companies praetorian guard. Beginning in 1982, Rif'at tried to improve his image, build a personal political following, and identify himself with reform efforts. [Redacted]

Rif'at's liabilities have increased along with his growing power in the regime. His role in internal security has earned him a reputation for brutality and corruption. Embassy officers note, for example, that Rif'at's manipulation of construction contracts for the armed forces during the 1970s was widely known. [Redacted]



Rif'at al-Assad [Redacted]

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[Redacted] Rif'at was responsible for a massacre of political prisoners at Tadmur prison in 1980 and for the brutal crushing of the revolt in Hamah in 1982. His pretensions to intellectual respectability and his personal excesses—he boasts of having 17 "legitimate" children, for example—have often been compared unfavorably by the Syrians with the simple lifestyle and personal rectitude of his brother, the President. [Redacted]

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Rif'at's opponents in the current power struggle have focused on blocking his claim to the succession while stopping short of putting themselves forward as contenders for the presidency. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] Several senior regime leaders—including Special Forces Commander Ali Haydar, Military Intelligence Chief Ali Duba, and Third Armored Division Commander Shafiq Fayyad—are longstanding opponents of Rif'at. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] many doubt that Rif'at can balance Syria's political forces and sectarian tensions to maintain stability and the preeminence of the ruling Alawite minority. [Redacted]

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Rif'at's Opponents

Personalities, power, and personal fiefdoms rather than major differences over policy direction or political ideology are the key issues in the power struggle. Many of Rif'at's opponents are fellow Alawites, all are among Assad's trusted lieutenants, and some are related to or have married into the Assad family. [redacted]

[redacted] 25X1
Duba, Haydar, and Rif'at had played key roles in bringing Assad to power, but that Duba and Haydar were increasingly disgusted with Rif'at's unruly behavior. [redacted] 25X1
[redacted] 25X1
[redacted] 25X1

Maj. Gen. Ali Haydar, the Alawite commander of Syria's elite Special Forces, is a respected military professional whose loyalty to Assad and opposition to Rif'at are both longstanding. Haydar and Rif'at have cooperated on common regime security concerns, but we believe the Special Forces commander is determined to head off realization of Rif'at's political ambitions. [redacted]

In late December 1979 Duba, a longtime Ba'thist, publicly charged at a Ba'th Party congress that Rif'at had no standing in the party, was not wanted by the party, and should not be given any responsibility by the party, [redacted] 25X1
[redacted] 25X1
[redacted] 25X1

Haydar was instrumental in suppressing demonstrations following the 1970 coup that brought Assad to power. [redacted] in 1980 and again in early 1982, Assad assigned Haydar politically sensitive tasks as one of the commanders of the military forces sent to crush popular uprisings in the provincial cities of Aleppo and Hamah. [redacted]
[redacted]

Maj. Gen. Shafiq Fayyad, the Commander of the Third Armored Division, is an Alawite and a cousin of the Assads. [redacted] Assad put Fayyad in command of the 70th Armored Brigade in the early 1970s—then one of the strongest units in the Army and a politically sensitive command because the unit had participated in many of the coups of the 1950s and 1960s. In 1980, Assad again drew on Fayyad's loyalty by deploying Fayyad's Third Division troops outside Aleppo to help control the civil disorders there. [redacted] 25X1

Throughout Assad's presidency, Haydar has publicly and privately opposed Rif'at. The Special Forces commander supported the anticorruption drive in 1977 that put Rif'at on the defensive, argued against Rif'at's recommendation of a repressive response to civil disorders in 1980, and in mid-1980 joined a small group of senior officers who accused Rif'at of engineering an assassination attempt on the President, [redacted] Rivalries between Haydar's troops and Rif'at's Defense Companies emerged as early as 1974, when a squabble between units of the two forces operating near the Lebanese border led to an exchange of fire. [redacted]

[redacted] 25X1
[redacted] 25X1

Maj. Gen. Ali Duba, the Director of Military Intelligence and a fellow Alawite, is also a longstanding Assad loyalist whose resentment of Rif'at has festered over the years. [redacted]

In the mid-1970s Fayyad was vocally critical of Rif'at, accusing him of profiteering. [redacted] 25X1

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[redacted] *Fayyad and Duba charged in early 1984 that Rif'at was preparing to move against the regime.* [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] *On a professional level, the competition between Rif'at and Shihabi for Assad's attention has deepened the rivalry.* [redacted] 25X1

Col. Adnan Makhluf, *the Commander of the Republican Guard, is in charge of the presidential protection service providing security for Assad's residence and office. Conflicting reports indicate he is either a brother or cousin of Assad's wife.* [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] *Makhluf harbors a deep hatred for Rif'at dating from an incident in 1979 when Rif'at accused him of stealing money and dismissed him from the position he then held as deputy commander of the Defense Companies. Makhluf in turn has charged that Rif'at and his cronies are deeply implicated in the locally known practice of "buying the road" from Lebanon into northwest Syria, permitting the entry of smuggled goods.* [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] *Makhluf was determined to expand his Republican Guard brigade into a force capable of displacing Rif'at's Defense Companies as the regime's praetorian guard. Assad is unlikely to allow the Republican Guard to completely displace the Defense Companies, but he is probably expanding the unit to act as a balancing force.* [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] *On a professional level, the competition between Rif'at and Shihabi for Assad's attention has deepened the rivalry.* [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] *in the Arab-Israeli war of 1973, Talas's attempts to deploy Rif'at's troops to the front over Rif'at's objections prompted an argument in which Rif'at's subordinates killed one of Talas's deputies. Throughout the past decade, the two men have continued to exchange personal and political abuse.* [redacted] 25X1

Vice President Abd al-Halim Khaddam, *Assad's chief adviser, spokesman, and emissary in foreign affairs has a longstanding, close relationship with President Assad and a high public profile that almost certainly is resented by Rif'at.* [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] *Makhluf was determined to expand his Republican Guard brigade into a force capable of displacing Rif'at's Defense Companies as the regime's praetorian guard. Assad is unlikely to allow the Republican Guard to completely displace the Defense Companies, but he is probably expanding the unit to act as a balancing force.* [redacted] 25X1

Lt. Gen. Hikmat Shihabi, *the Army Chief of Staff, is frequently characterized by diplomats and military observers in Damascus as a shrewd, capable, and hardworking technician.* [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] *Assad respects Shihabi—a Sunni—and relies on him for political insights and advice.* [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] *Assad respects Shihabi—a Sunni—and relies on him for political insights and advice.* [redacted] 25X1

Personal antipathy between Shihabi and Rif'at apparently dates back at least to mid-1978, [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] *Following an unsuccessful assassination attempt on Khaddam last July, suspicion quickly focused on Rif'at or his subordinates, according to reports from the US Embassy.* [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] *Khaddam is convinced that Rif'at was responsible and threatened that he would resign if Assad failed to act against Rif'at.* [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] *The incident is likely to blow over unless further evidence implicating Rif'at comes to light.* [redacted] 25X1

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[redacted] many of Rif'at's opponents harbor grievances against him. We believe military commanders and senior officials view the power struggle, at least in part, in personal terms. Their opposition indicates they fear that, at a minimum, they would lose their jobs if Rif'at assumes control over military and intelligence matters or succeeds to the presidency.

[redacted]

In our judgment, the power struggle is in part the unintended consequence of Assad's practice of balancing opposing factions within his inner circle. Different groups of Assad's lieutenants serve varying purposes—loyal Alawite commanders head critical units and intelligence services; Sunnis in prominent leadership positions maintain the appearance of confessional balance; and Rif'at, in effect, plays the bully. Each has held the others in check.

We believe Rif'at's critical role in commanding forces that have deterred or quelled challenges to the regime from its Sunni opponents as much as his fraternal relationship contributes to Assad's apparent tolerance of his behavior. The combination of objectionable behavior and indispensability, in our view, is well illustrated by Rif'at's reported role in Assad's coup in 1970. [redacted] in the late 1960s Rif'at led a group of non-Ba'thist military personnel who saw to it that Defense Minister Assad's orders were implemented, disregarding the nominal authority of the Party Command. In mid-October 1970, Rif'at entered the home of then President Atassi without permission, treated the President with contempt, and provoked his resignation. These actions set the stage for the political crisis that led to Assad's takeover in November.

Armed Confrontation

The conflict within Assad's inner circle became public in late February when Rif'at responded with a show of force to developments he interpreted as a move against him by his opponents. According to Embassy and attache reports, during the late afternoon and evening of 27 February, heavy security was put into place in the Malki area of Damascus around government buildings, the presidency, and the residences of

high-ranking Syrian officials. Defense Companies and rival regular military forces went on a high state of alert. Rif'at sent Defense Companies units to block routes into the city and positioned tanks and SA-8 missiles on the mountains overlooking Damascus.

[redacted]

[redacted] the immediate cause of the conflict was Rif'at's anger over the proposed rotations of two loyal division commanders to lesser jobs and the transfer of some 10 senior officers and approximately 80 middle-level officers also considered loyal to him. Rif'at's efforts to overturn the orders apparently failed, and Military Intelligence Chief Duba threatened to arrest any officer resisting transfer. Rif'at, in turn, threatened to launch airstrikes against the headquarters of any military commanders who opposed him.

Rif'at may have blundered into the open confrontation.

[redacted] Rif'at believed he had lined up enough support among the regular Army commanders to challenge orders issued by Chief of Staff Shihabi. Once the crisis was under way, however, he discovered that he had underestimated the surge of opposition to his succession bid and that key Alawite officers—including Third Armored Division Commander Fayyad and Special Forces Commander Haydar—refused to support him.

[redacted] Rif'at added a wider, political dimension to the confrontation by calling for the resignation and trial of several of his opponents.

[redacted]

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Assad's Objectives

President Assad intervened to seek a resolution to the struggle immediately after the conflict developed into an armed confrontation. [redacted]

[redacted] beginning on 29 February, Assad convened a series of Ba'th Party leadership meetings and a family council of several Alawite religious leaders and the Assads' mother to mediate. The party meetings were given prominent play in the press to boost public confidence that the crisis was being dealt with and that the President remained in charge. [redacted]

[redacted]

Assad's initial strategy—to reach a compromise and avoid steps against either side—failed. We believe Rif'at refused to back down even after being named Vice President in March because his new responsibilities remained undefined. [redacted]

[redacted]

Tension remained high throughout March, April, and early May as rival security forces stayed on alert in and around Damascus and in cities north of the capital. Isolated outbreaks occurred in Damascus and in Latakia in the Alawite heartland in northwest Syria. According to Embassy reports, Rif'at's Defense Companies continued to strengthen their positions. Special Forces and Republican Guard units—augmenting the small numbers of regular Army troops—commanded by Rif'at's opponents responded with similar measures. [redacted]

Assad ultimately imposed a resolution of the crisis by increasing the pressure on Rif'at to back down, [redacted]

[redacted] Initially, Assad instructed the Syrian media to limit coverage of Rif'at. In late April, Assad ordered that the reserve commissions of officers and men of Rif'at's Defense Companies not be renewed as they expired, affecting up to 7,000 reservists, and ordered that the special pay and privileges given to Defense Companies personnel be withdrawn. In early May, Assad asked the

leaders of an important Alawite subject to withdraw their support from his brother, leading to the desertion from the Defense Companies of significant numbers of personnel belonging to the tribe. [redacted]

We believe Assad's principal objective since the internal crisis eased in mid-May has been to restore an image of regime unity and at least working relations among the factions of his inner circle. [redacted]

[redacted] once the Defense Companies returned to a lower alert on 8 May, Assad and Rif'at agreed that Rif'at should begin conciliation meetings with his rivals in the Ba'th Party. In late May, Rif'at left for Moscow, leading an official delegation that included two of his major rivals in a show of regime unity. [redacted]

Assad has taken steps to prevent the recurrence of an armed confrontation. The US Embassy reported that, with Rif'at's departure for the Soviet Union and an apparently temporary exile abroad on 28 May, fortified positions in the capital were dismantled. By 8 June, Defense Companies and Special Forces units inserted into the city were withdrawn. In addition, [redacted]

the size, capability, and mission of the Defense Companies have been reduced, and an expanded role has been given to the Republican Guard and Air Force Intelligence, which are capable of balancing the Defense Companies. [redacted]

Prospects for the Power Struggle

Assad has put both Rif'at and his opponents on notice that another armed confrontation would be dealt with harshly. [redacted]

[redacted] the Defense Companies would be held responsible for any clashes between rival forces and that the unit commanders involved would be court-martialed. [redacted]

[redacted] Assad also has curtailed the independent decisionmaking authority of Rif'at's opponents in the military by tightening control over them through the chain of command and asserting personal authority over decisions affecting their forces. [redacted]

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Rif'at's Assets and the Possibility of Another Confrontation

Renewed armed confrontation between rival factions in the power struggle appears unlikely, at least in the short term.

[redacted] Rif'at's relationship to the Defense Companies remains undefined, but they indicate he is no longer in formal command and that Assad has clearly signaled his determination to remove officers deploying troops in Damascus without his authorization.

The steps Assad has taken against the Defense Companies since May—although balanced by limitations placed on Rif'at's opponents—probably also have affected political perceptions in Damascus to Rif'at's detriment. We believe that by late April Rif'at lost the initiative and momentum he seized by deploying troops into and around the city at the end of February and that he is now on the defensive.

Embassy and defense attache reports indicate the Defense Companies have been reduced from 25,000 to 15,000 men. A Defense Companies armor battalion stationed near the presidency office in west Damascus has been removed and not replaced. The SA-8 mis-

siles Rif'at deployed overlooking the city to deter an Air Force move against him have been removed from Defense Companies control and attached to the Air Defense Command. A T-55 tank regiment, a D-30 120-mm howitzer battalion, and a BM-21 multiple rocket launcher battalion have also been deactivated.

Nevertheless, Rif'at almost certainly retains the loyalty of individual Defense Companies officers and men and some regular Army officers. Although the extent of his authority is uncertain, the Defense Companies as a whole still include four active combat brigades—three armored brigades and one mechanized infantry brigade—equipped with 325 T-72 tanks. In addition, although Rif'at lacks strong allies in the senior regime leadership, the Embassy notes an unconfirmed report that Rif'at henchman Ahmad Diab will be named to the important Ba'th Party post of Assistant Secretary General for the Regional Command. If the political tide appears to turn in Rif'at's favor over time, some of Rif'at's opponents might swing their support to him to avoid emerging on the losing side.

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We believe a renewed military confrontation is unlikely as long as Assad remains healthy, but tensions within Assad's inner circle are unlikely to dissipate soon. Rif'at's powers as Vice President have not been clarified, and his ambition to establish an unchallenged claim to the succession almost certainly persists.

[redacted] Rif'at has become increasingly fearful that Assad has reneged on what Rif'at believes was a promise that he will be designated Assad's political heir.

The US Embassy in Damascus notes that Assad's plans remain unclear but has concluded tentatively he will give Rif'at the opportunity to establish a new image in his vice presidential role, while simultaneously testing him for genuine leadership ability. Embassy officers believe Assad would prefer that Rif'at succeed to the presidency but is unsure of Rif'at's political acumen or that Rif'at can be made acceptable to the Syrian political establishment.

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We believe that Rif'at has been put on probation and that Assad eventually will offer him additional opportunities to change his image. [redacted]

[redacted] in May Assad gave Rif'at a chance to play the role of statesman, ordering Rif'at to be present for a state dinner for Romanian President Ceausescu, asking visiting Soviet official Karen Brutents to meet with Rif'at, and directing his own protocol office to supervise protocol matters for him. Assad probably also intended Rif'at's visit to Moscow to burnish his brother's image and to counter criticism from Ba'th Party leftists that Rif'at is too close to the United States and the West. [redacted]

The Ba'th Party Regional Congress and election to the party's Regional Command—several times delayed but now scheduled to take place this fall—are likely to provide the next opportunity for significant developments in the power struggle. Assad almost certainly hopes to make the congress a forum for a display of regime unity and a stamp of legitimacy for possible shifts in leadership positions to strengthen a new balance between Rif'at and his opponents. Rif'at's base in the party is slim, however, and past party congresses have provided occasions for expression of strong opposition to Rif'at. [redacted]

Rif'at's efforts to establish an unchallenged claim to the succession almost certainly will require a deal with Ba'th leaders. Assad will probably continue pressing him to build a base in the party. Rif'at, however, has attempted to bypass the party hierarchy by building alternatives to the Ba'th through his sponsorship of the "League of Graduates of Higher Studies" and an Alawite political and social organization known as the "Murtada." Neither has the countrywide base of the Ba'th, its legitimacy, or anything resembling its massive organizational structure. [redacted]

[redacted] Assad has sanctioned efforts to limit the role and membership of the League and the Murtada, probably to force Rif'at into an accommodation with the Ba'th. [redacted]

We believe the power struggle is likely to resume once Rif'at returns to Syria. Assad probably will seek to increase Rif'at's responsibilities incrementally without

upsetting the political and confessional balances that underlie regime stability. His centralized rule over the past 14 years, however, has resulted in the proliferation of networks throughout the military, the bureaucracy, and the Ba'th Party based on personal loyalties. If Assad changes senior appointees—and there are indications that he will shuffle at least some defense, intelligence, and Cabinet positions—rivalries among the networks throughout the regime will promote a continuing struggle over lower echelon appointments, access, and decisionmaking authority. [redacted]

We cannot rule out the possibility that key contenders in the power struggle will resort to assassination or terrorism. If Assad fails to find working compromises among the factions in his inner circle, or if Assad's health deteriorates suddenly and prompts renewed tension, Rif'at or his opponents might order—or fail to prevent—terrorist tactics by their subordinates. Both sides in the power struggle have control over intelligence assets that have been involved in past terrorist operations. [redacted]

Succession Outlook

Assad has said little publicly about the succession issue, responding to questions by referring only to the existence of sanctioned procedures. Article 88 of the Constitution stipulates that the First Vice President will carry out the President's duties for an interim period if the President cannot do so. In the event the President is permanently incapacitated or dies, a successor is to be nominated by the Ba'th Party Regional Command, ratified by the People's Assembly, and approved in a national referendum. [redacted]

Assad's appointment of three vice presidents in March left open the question of an interim successor. Assad named the vice presidents in separate decrees and omitted a formal order of precedence. The order in which the decrees were issued gives former Foreign Minister Khaddam only a slim claim to preeminence, followed by Rif'at and Ba'th Party Assistant Secretary General Mashariqa. Assad almost certainly intended to leave the issue and his options open by creating a vice presidential structure that gives senior policy advisers, the military, and the party equal stakes in the continued stability of the regime. [redacted]

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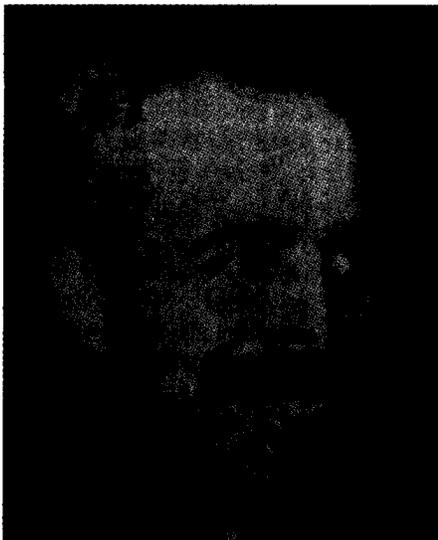
If Assad dies suddenly within the next year or if there are no agreed arrangements for the succession, we cannot rule out the possibility that tension within his inner circle will spark an open struggle drawing in rival security forces. If Rif'at gambles on a military move to defeat his rivals, or Ali Haydar, Fayyad, and other commanders see no alternative to a military confrontation, the outcome almost certainly would be a succession of short-lived regimes—a return to the pattern of Syrian politics of the 1950s and 1960s. Syria's first military coup in 1949, for example, led to three government turnovers before the end of the year. [redacted]

We believe it more likely that there will be an orderly transition to at least a short-lived successor regime, particularly if Assad continues his efforts to restore balance among the factions in his inner circle. Regime leaders have a common interest in heading off an internecine struggle and the possible collapse of Alawite rule. In late 1978, during a period of heightened concern over Assad's health, US officials reported that senior regime leaders were taking steps to establish a "presidential council" to select a successor to Assad and facilitate an orderly transfer of power. A similar body might be constituted if Assad's health again declines. [redacted]

Rif'at's Chances

We believe Rif'at is unlikely to succeed in striking political deals with his opponents or in building a base in the Ba'th Party to emerge as Assad's choice for successor. Rif'at's intemperate style, the widespread popular distrust and hatred for him resulting from his command of the repressive forces of Assad's regime over the years, and the divisions even within his own Alawite community over his fitness to rule suggest Rif'at will fail to build a broad enough base or strike the necessary political deals. Assad has enough experience in politics to know that blessing his brother as his successor will have little effect if strong opposition to Rif'at persists. [redacted]

In our judgment, the most likely scenario for a smooth transition would be a political deal among members of Assad's inner circle giving Rif'at a prominent role behind the scenes of a new regime—possibly as part of a policy-setting military council—and nominating a publicly acceptable figurehead to succeed to the presidency. Assad's regime, joining strongman and president in one man, is a departure from Syrian politics of



Mustafa Talas [redacted]

Monday Morning ©

the 1960s, when military strongmen ruled behind nominal presidents. The regime after Assad might fall back on previous patterns. Rif'at might conclude that a role as strongman or one of several in a council is preferable to the prospect of failure in seeking party nomination, Assembly approval, and national support in a referendum. [redacted]

Likely Candidates

Defense Minister Talas is probably the most likely candidate for the presidency if an orderly transfer to a figurehead leader is worked out either over the long term or under the pressure of Assad's sudden demise. In 1977, the Embassy tapped Talas as Assad's most likely successor, noting that he is a popular orator with solid Ba'thist credentials, a Sunni Muslim loyal to the Alawite regime from a town near Hamah, and a congenial figure around Damascus. Talas is known for his affability—his ready smile, his propensity to stop his car to offer citizens rides to their destinations, and his eye for the ladies. Last March he gained slightly increased political prominence by being named Deputy Prime Minister in addition to his Defense post. Talas's reputation as a lightweight in bureaucratic struggles—he is known as "la vache qui rit" (the smiling cow)—might be desirable to a military strongman or strongmen seeking to exploit him as a figurehead successor. [redacted]

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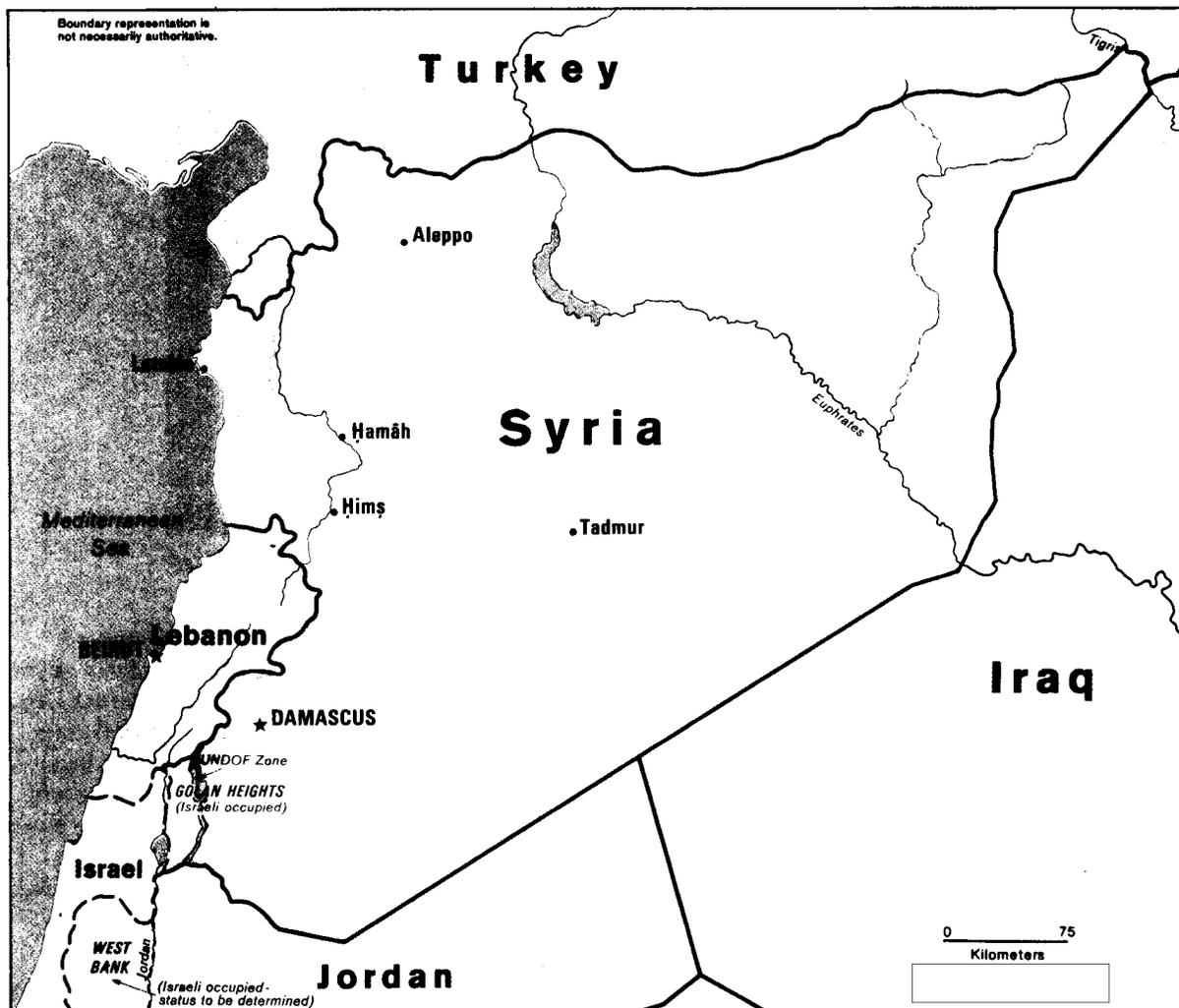
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Army Chief of Staff Hikmat Shihabi, a Sunni from a small town near Aleppo, is also a leading potential contender if a political deal can be arranged to settle on a compromise candidate. Shihabi's Sunni identification might dampen sectarian polarization over the makeup of a new regime, and he might be seen by senior Alawite commanders—as he has been seen by Assad—as a key to preserving the loyalty of Sunnis in the officer corps. [redacted]

[redacted] Shihabi has avoided personal politicking and has not sought to force a clique of officers to stand behind him, but he has privately expressed a readiness to succeed Assad. Shihabi's intelligence, competence,

and experience suggest he is less malleable than Talas, but the Alawite commanders might choose him as the successor most capable of holding the regime together and of retaining popular support. Rif'at might also agree to a deal making Shihabi president, calculating—as Shihabi would also calculate—that any arrangements would be temporary. [redacted]

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Hikmat Shihabi

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Abd al-Halim Khaddam

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Darkhorse Figures

Several figures in the senior regime leadership who are likely to play important roles in selecting Assad's successor might themselves emerge as candidates.

Vice President Khaddam from Baniyas has no political base, but he is a longtime Ba'thist and a Sunni with family ties to the Alawite community and has served the regime from its inception as a trusted technician. Special Forces Commander Haydar is popular in the Alawite community and is a respected military commander whose troops might figure heavily if an open struggle over the succession occurs.

Muhammad Haydar, the chief of the Foreign Relations Department of the Ba'th Party, is from a fairly prominent Alawite family from the Latakia region. He has strong Ba'thist credentials and served as Deputy Prime Minister in the mid-1970s. Haydar's reputation for corruption—his involvement in kick-back schemes earned him the epithet "Mr. Five Percent" and resulted in his dismissal from the Cabinet in 1976—would count against him, however, and,

Assad recently disciplined him for intemperate remarks on the power struggle.

Assad's inner circle includes intelligence and security advisers whose resources and access to information make them at least potentially important power brokers. Muhammad Khuli, the chief of Air Force

Intelligence and the President's security adviser, comes from Assad's home village and has acted as the primary operational coordinator for the internal security agencies and as an emissary and troubleshooter for Assad. Khuli's strongest asset has been his loyalty, however, and he has avoided a political role.

he is taciturn to the point of shyness, and an Embassy biographical note suggests he has reached his limit as a security technician close to the President. Like Khuli, Military Intelligence Chief Ali Duba has played a key role in security matters—protecting Alawite interests in the military. An Alawite from Baniyas, he has had important leadership positions in the Ba'th Party, but he has seldom emerged as a public figure or potential candidate for a strictly political leadership position.

Longer Term Prospects

Any successor regime will have difficulty establishing its legitimacy and consolidating control. Any deal Assad arranges over succession arrangements could easily fall apart once he is gone, particularly if Rif'at's ambitions continue to exceed his allotted role. Sectarian tension is high, and Assad's removal from the

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Muhammad Khuli

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scene almost certainly would encourage the Sunni opposition to challenge Alawite predominance. Sunni opponents of the regime include a disparate assortment of political exiles, the Muslim Brotherhood, and other dissident groups gathered under the umbrella of the National Alliance for the Liberation of Syria based in Europe. They are not in a position to make an early bid for power, and the next ruler or strongman probably will be an Alawite or a Sunni loyal to the Alawite regime. The Sunni Muslim Brotherhood might renew a campaign of terrorism and civil disorder, however, draining the resources of the new regime.

Implications for the United States

We believe Assad's departure from the scene will not advance US interests in the region. Assad has frequently taken a course that runs counter to US policy—opposing the Camp David accords, the September 1982 US peace initiative, and the 17 May accord in Lebanon. His 14-year rule, however, has shown him to be a calculating pragmatist. He continues to play a dominant but balancing role in Lebanon, to seek a dialogue with the United States on Lebanon and on the peace process, and to place limits on Soviet involvement in Syria.

Assad's successor is unlikely to have even the marginal policy-setting latitude Assad has gained from providing Syria—a nation divided by tribal, regional, sectarian, and class differences—with stable rule since 1970. Assad has proved to be an adept politician, manipulating Ba'thist pan-Arab rhetoric to serve Syrian national interests. A weaker successor regime is unlikely to make significant departures from long-standing Syrian positions. Embassy assessments note that the Syrians have evolved an elaborate system of checks and balances in the party and government structure that influence the formulation and conduct of domestic and foreign policy. This system will work in favor of continuity once Assad is gone. We believe these same factors will inhibit the flexibility of a new regime.

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Syria's foreign policy under any successor regime will be based on enduring national interests. A new government in Damascus will be unlikely to withdraw from Lebanon without first achieving Israeli withdrawal and consolidation of the authority of a government in Beirut responsive to Syrian concerns. Any successor regime would oppose progress toward peace in the Middle East that would leave Syrian lands occupied by Israel.

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Moscow's importance to Damascus as a superpower patron and arms supplier means there is little chance of a significant departure from the current Syrian-Soviet relationship. We know of no contender for power in Syria likely to gamble on a change in Syria's superpower orientation. Rif'at's reputed pro-Western and moderate leanings in our view stem from his cynical judgments on politically expedient means to build opposition to Ba'th Party leftists who oppose him. Army Chief of Staff Shihabi is viscerally pro-Western, but he believes Syria has no alternative to its relationship with the USSR.

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Additional Syrian concessions to Soviet interests—such as granting base rights—probably are equally unlikely, in our view. A more visible, enlarged Soviet

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presence would risk inciting conservative Islamic opposition to the regime and could prompt renewed terrorist attacks on government and Soviet personnel or installations. Moreover, concessions to the USSR would strain Syria's relations with Saudi Arabia or other important financial supporters. Thus, like the United States, Moscow is unlikely to see its interests advanced by the departure of Assad, who, although he has had policy disputes with the Soviets, has been a consistent and dependable partner.

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A weak successor regime seeking to strengthen its legitimacy might attempt to increase regional tension. A leader less tactically adept than Assad in rallying public support for broadly formulated goals might abandon Assad's caution on the direct use of Syrian troops in Lebanon and toward Jordan. Such a leader might also allow renewed Palestinian activity across the Golan Heights, a move that would provoke the Israelis. Even without such provocation, Israel would be concerned about the intentions of a new regime. Rivalries within the new Syrian leadership might contribute to erratic shifts in the means employed to carry out Syrian policy, heightening uncertainty about Syrian regional goals.

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